

MILITARY-TRANSITION.ORG

# MILITARY TO CIVILIAN TRANSITION CHALLENGES



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The transition back into civilian life brings challenges that service members and families must address. What makes the process difficult, techniques to overcome, and how employers can assist is the focus of this guide.

Research among veterans highlights the difficulty associated with returning to civilian life.

**76%** of veterans say their transition was stressful

**59%** say it took more time than expected

**52%** say it was confusing

**48%** say it was more difficult than they expected

**38%** say their first salary was worse than expected

Source: [www.military-transition.org/dashboard](http://www.military-transition.org/dashboard)



BARRIERS \* LIMITATIONS \* VOIDS & CONCERNS

After two decades of helping fellow veterans, we've identified 12 broad challenges that can be grouped into four categories:

## CATEGORY I

### VOIDS TO FILL

- Purpose and Meaning
- Identity or Community
- Structure and Norms

## CATEGORY II

### BARRIERS TO BREAK

- Language
- Culture
- Information

## CATEGORY III

### CONCERNS TO ADDRESS

- Time
- Family
- Employment and Financial

## CATEGORY IV

### LIMITATIONS TO OVERCOME

- Inadequate Self-Reflection
- Reluctance to Ask for Help
- Medical

# VOIDS TO FILL

## 1. LOSS OF PURPOSE OR MEANING

The military is a lifestyle, not a job, so the transition out of uniform represents a significant life change. Those who volunteer for today's military take pride in serving. They don't join for wealth, and a significant paycheck isn't their motivation. Instead, many join in search of purpose, or they find meaning while serving. As individuals become integrated with their respective units, fellow service members become like brothers and sisters. This connection leads to a secondary purpose of serving their military family, and members are willing to risk their own lives for those around them. No other community shares such a deep commitment or sense of purpose between members. Those outside the military help co-workers, but few are committed to risking their own lives for their well-being. This bond is difficult to replace and creates a void to fill when taking off the uniform.

## 2. LOSS OF IDENTITY OR COMMUNITY

The connection members share extends beyond the military and becomes a dominant part of their lives. They surround themselves with other uniformed individuals, and many social activities are with those who share their same ideals. Families become part of this community, which further insulates members from the outside world. As experience and rank increase, members are also expected to become more committed to their unit and the broader military community.

## VOIDS TO FILL **CONTINUED**



*Each branch of the military, along with the Guard and Reserves, has a unique identity and sense of community.*

As rank increases, service members become more and more assimilated within this community. Individual behaviors and thought processes align with their military branch, rank, or occupational specialty.

This environment leads more senior members to surrender their individual identities and transform into a name/rank. They embody this status in and out of uniform and might stop responding to first names. Example: Richard Clark becomes Chief Clark, and his military associates all call him Chief.

Achieving rank is a source of pride, and members rightfully deserve to feel a sense of accomplishment. However, some insist on holding life-long stature and allow this to define their future identity. They never fully surrender titles, and the military/veteran community embrace this practice. Some maintain their image and incorporate titles on business cards, signature blocks, and social media profiles long after serving. This isn't a negative, but can add to the difficulty of assuming a new civilian identity or assimilating into an employer's culture.

The military community supports both cultural assimilation and celebration. In this context, families aren't immune. Spouses often take on their partners' rank, intentionally or unintentionally, and volunteer duties are expected when rank increases.

The culmination of these factors creates an immersive culture that amplifies the challenges of transition.

## VOIDS TO FILL CONTINUED

### 3. LOSS OF STRUCTURE AND NORMS

The regimented military lifestyle includes obvious and obscure norms which perpetuate structure. An example is daily schedules that are inflexible, regardless of the location, season, or environment.

Many civilian organizations have consistent daily routines. However, the level of structure and consequences for deviating differ from the military. An example is physical fitness routines. It's not uncommon for civilians to visit a gym. However, the conditions are different. The entire office from a company doesn't arrive at a local gym or community park to begin the same workout each morning. The boss doesn't stand in front of them, talk about some 'important' topic, force them to push themselves physically and lead them on a five-mile run together before 6 a.m.

They also don't have an exact time they must arrive at the cafeteria or risk not getting served.

*Civilians can deviate from the norm and exercise their individual preferences.*

These are clear examples, but less obvious structure and norms includes knowing what to wear in all situations. It's easy to prep in the morning when you wear the same clothes each day. Original thought isn't required, and individual style isn't allowed in this environment.

## VOIDS TO FILL **CONTINUED**

Another example is the use of duty checklists, pre-scripted actions, and consistent routines members follow in many roles. Regardless of the situation or environment, members are successful because they followed the process or modeled the behaviors of those around them.

They also benefit from continuity books that prescribe duties and tasks when starting a new role or duty assignment.

*A more obscure aspect of military life involves remembering names and understanding an organization's hierarchy or power structure (chain of command).*

In the military, names are displayed, organizational structure is visible, and individual status or level of influence (rank) is always clear.

Navigating corporate norms can be complex and confusing when you're accustomed to clear military structures and hierarchy.

On the continuum of regimentation, the Marines are the most structured, followed by the Army. Within both the Marines and Army, those serving in direct combat roles are most regimented.

The Air Force and Navy aren't as regimented, but have specific roles that tend to mirror the Army and Marines. The newest branch (Space Force) is still developing its culture, but mostly follows the Air Force's structure and norms.



# BARRIERS TO BREAK

## 4. LANGUAGE

The military environment relies upon adherence to standards, and one is the language members use in and out of uniform. Specific words, phrases, acronyms, and jargon are unique and almost become a foreign language to outsiders.

*Each branch has a unique dialect that makes communicating with those outside their 'closed community' a challenge. Not only does this confuse non-military outsiders, but service-specific dialects confuse members from other branches. It's common for the Army to confuse the Navy and the same holds between the Army and Air Force. The Marines tend to confuse everyone else.*

Branch-specific dialects continually evolve, which means veterans might not understand the lingo used today within their own service. Some dialects also employ intentional and repeated profanities to emphasize topics. Both appropriate and inappropriate phrases are so common that it's difficult to remove from normal thought processes, yet essential when transitioning back into civilian life.



***“Employers don’t hire what they don’t understand.”***





## 5. CULTURE

The military has an immersive culture, as does each branch. This creates an environment where conformity is inescapably linked with recognition and continued promotion.

The way soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen and guardians think and behave are both driven and constrained by culture and reinforced by training.

The civilian population doesn't understand and worse yet, has erroneous perceptions based upon the lens of Hollywood.

*Stereotypes are pervasive and often fit into broad and incorrect categories such as rigid, broken, aggressive, or unstable.*

This gross misunderstanding can lead to isolation and prevent or limit military members from going 'outside the wire' to interact with non-veterans. This can be a tremendous barrier to overcome and trust can suffer on both sides of the military-civilian divide. Both sides perpetuate the separation, and military members often sees civilians as undisciplined, lazy or ungrateful for the freedoms they enjoy.

These broad generalizations and misperceptions need to be removed and trust restored to help bridge this divide.

## BARRIERS TO BREAK **CONTINUED**

### **6. INFORMATION**

The information barrier associated with returning to civilian life is clear yet confusing. The best way to describe this environment is to say there's misinformation, gaps, and overload all simultaneously. Over 40,000 VSOs (Veteran Service Organizations) exist to help and there's a sea of goodwill. The sea gets deeper when you consider well-intentioned veterans who provide limited or narrowly focused transition and employment information. These individuals want to help but often generate confusion among the broader military audience.

Self-proclaimed transition and employment experts are plenty. Their intentions are noble, but some lessons don't always transfer beyond a limited sub-set of the military population. Those who achieve limited success in a short period as a civilian may broadcast their advice while the majority who struggle are quiet. This creates a perception, especially on social media, that success is easily attained. Today's sea of goodwill is encouraging, but the truth is members can drown while trying to find their way and establish a new life.

In addition, some VSOs have the different motives or provide a limited frame of reference. This can lead to greater confusion and inaccurate assumptions regarding civilian life. Some members believe that follow-on employment is assured since veterans have leadership skills that industry desperately needs. Their training and experience make them natural leaders while career civilians lack discipline. The result is that some minimize the effort required for transition or, worse, make poor decisions based on the misinformation that permeates the transition space.

# CONCERNS TO ADDRESS

## 7. TIME

Service members often have busy schedules with limited flexibility. This dynamic creates challenges when trying to understand the civilian workforce, adapt skills, and build networks that enable a successful transition.

Some rationalize their inability to actively prepare for civilian life. Common statements to justify delayed preparation include: I'm too busy, I'm too focused on the mission, or I don't want to disappoint those above me or fail those below me.

*The overwhelming sense of commitment to the mission and military community makes shifting attention away from one's core duties almost impossible, especially for those more senior in rank.*

This concern leads many to delay until late in the process when it's almost too late to make the change necessary. This needs to be understood and actions taken to prepare for what's next.

Another common reason some delay preparation comes down to overconfidence combined with limited understanding of the civilian workplace. This leads members to assume they're prepared until it's too late and reinforces or amplifies the challenges mentioned throughout this guide.



## CONCERNS TO ADDRESS **CONTINUED**

### **8. FAMILY**

The military lifestyle also applies to families and they too must navigate the return to civilian life.

Spouses and children often become accustomed to the warm embrace of the military environment. They enjoy being part of a united community of like-minded individuals and the safety that comes with being part of this extended network.

When arriving at a new location, they're welcomed by the new unit and have sponsors or friends from past assignments to help get them oriented.

They have a community grocery store (commissary) and retailer (exchange) that exist to serve them, plus a local gas station, hospital, dentist, and many other conveniences (depending upon the specific duty location).

*A military relocation might be across the globe, but the new location has the same general feel as their previous assignment.*

This can be different when you transition for the last time into a new community without the military welcome wagon and familiar support elements/agencies.



***“Families also make a transition. Be sure to prepare and weather the storm together.”***

# CONCERNS TO ADDRESS CONTINUED

## 9. EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL

Financial stability is the greatest concern for many when thinking about what follows the military and the largest component is future employment.

Many military describe entering the civilian workforce as if they were entering the ‘unknown’.

*The military won't make you rich, but it does provide stability with good benefits.*

Some members are prepared financially, but others don't have an adequate safety net.

Addressing this concern is paramount to success.

Preparation reduces the unknown but doesn't eliminate the stress associated with finances and locating preferred employment.

Underprepared members accept less than optimal employment, which amplifies other transition challenges. They continue to seek preferred employment while the stress endures at higher levels for them and their families.



*“Finding a good job and providing financial security was my biggest transition concern.”*



# LIMITATIONS TO OVERCOME

## 10. INADEQUATE SELF-REFLECTION

Successful transitions begin with an understanding of what members and their families want after serving.

They might not have answers at first, but should begin thinking about important transition questions such as location, lifestyle, income, types of careers, potential companies, and schools.

The information barrier and lack of time discussed previously contribute to limited self-reflection.

*The military environment teaches how to adapt, and many think this quality is highly marketable, independent of other important skills.*

As a result, they don't always consider personal desires or preferences. Instead, they ask employers, "What do you need?" with the intent of adapting themselves to satisfy this need, just like they've done throughout their military careers.

They don't understand that saying to an employer "I can do anything" often translates into "I can do nothing" in this situation. It takes time and multiple rejections before many realize they need to think about their strengths, weaknesses, interests, desires, and preferences.



# LIMITATIONS TO OVERCOME **CONTINUED**

## 11. RELUCTANCE TO ASK FOR HELP

The military community is reluctant to ask for help and members often feel that requesting help or accepting assistance admits weakness.

Right or wrong, they believe their ranks are filled with the nation's best, and people like them don't ask for help, they provide it.

*Admitting they need assistance tarnishes the message society has told them about being heroes and warriors.*

Getting over this limitation is difficult but a necessary step forward. Mentors are essential and can help guide service members towards the resources or mindsets needed to be successful.

## 12. MEDICAL

Some veterans have medical limitations to overcome or family members with special needs.

That's just a fact of life, so don't let it stop transition planning or related activities. Factor these into timelines and have realistic expectations.

Utilize the services available and get assistance throughout the transition process.

# WAYS TO REDUCE TRANSITION CHALLENGES

## 1. BE AWARE OF THE CHALLENGES AND START PREPARING EARLY

Change is never easy and the military-to-civilian transition is far more than a simple career change. Knowing what's ahead is critical so members and families can begin preparing well in advance.



*“Failure to prepare is preparing to fail.”*

## 2. GET CONNECTED

One of the best ways to start preparing is by connecting with individuals and families who've already navigated the transition. Everyone has a story to share and can help you understand and avoid pitfalls. Get connected online or through a video chat, and talk about transition experiences. Finding mentors is paramount, and service members should begin early in their careers, well ahead of the transition. Contact former supervisors, friends, and co-workers while renewing relationships. After this, reach out through ACP (American Corporate Partners) or Veterati to find veterans and non-veterans who want to assist.





# WAYS TO REDUCE TRANSITION CHALLENGES **CONTINUED**

## 3. REFLECT AND ADAPT

Adequate self-reflection is an issue that service members and families overlook. Start thinking about what follows the military right away since decisions made while serving will impact future life and career options. Understand that you get to choose what's next. The freedom to decide is a blessing that turns into a curse if you're not ready. Once you have some ideas, do your homework and learn more about the options available. Start a journal and keep your thoughts together. This eventually leads to a transition plan with goals, timelines, and enabling actions.



***“You can’t hit a target you don’t have.”***

## 4. ESTABLISH GOOD HABITS

Moving from a highly regimented environment into complete freedom sounds great, but the immediate loss of structure can be difficult. Start the process knowing you'll keep some structure and use this to your advantage. Before the transition, make a commitment to accomplish at least one activity each day to prepare. Get into a routine that allows honest self-evaluation. It's difficult, but you need to find time to start thinking and planning. After the transition, keep expanding your knowledge. Maintain a fitness routine, and don't fill the open time with destructive habits.

## WAYS TO REDUCE TRANSITION CHALLENGES **CONTINUED**

### **5. SAVE MONEY BEFOREHAND**

There could be a slight disruption in your paycheck or an extended period with lower pay. Having a few dollars set aside will reduce stress levels and allow you to focus on the important aspects of transition.



*“Reduce your financial stress and anxiety by reducing debts and saving 6-12 months of pay ahead of the transition.”*

### **6. HAVE SOMEONE TO TALK TO**

Knowing that someone cares makes a difference. It can be a friend, family member, counselor, or anyone you trust. The battle buddy concept you learned while serving is just as important in civilian life. Don't wait until the last minute to identify your support network.

### **7. GET INVOLVED OR VOLUNTEER**

Feelings of loss or emptiness are common after taking off the uniform, and doing something to help others is a great way to fill this gap. Local community, church, and school groups are options, and organizations like Team RWB, IAVA, SVA, American Legion, AMVETS and Blue Star Families are always available.



# WAYS TO REDUCE TRANSITION CHALLENGES **CONTINUED**

## 8. GET HELP

Everyone needs help at some point, and it's a sign of strength to ask. The transition challenges are real, and we're losing many veterans to suicide each day. Please don't let it get that far. Get the support you need. There are many agencies available to assist, and we suggest starting with our friends at [StopSoldierSuicide.org](http://StopSoldierSuicide.org) or [Mission22.com](http://Mission22.com).



## 9. HELP SOMEONE ELSE

Everyone needs a support network, and helping others on a personal level is one of the best ways to fill the opening. It helps keep things in perspective and highlights the fact that challenges are a part of life. Helping others enables self-reflection, and research suggests it actually makes us happier.

## 10. BE PATIENT

You didn't become a warrior overnight, and the return to civilian life requires time, so be patient and give yourself some grace.

# HOW EMPLOYERS CAN ASSIST

*These actions, combined with empathy and understanding, enable better recruitment and integration of military members and families.*

## UTILIZE A WHOLE-PERSON AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED APPROACH

A sense of purpose and community exists when members feel valued and their contributions extend beyond the workplace. Cultures that value hard work combined with team building and outside activities appeal to the military audience. They want to be a part of something bigger than themselves, and showing how their work impacts the larger organization or society can be helpful.

A great way to develop a community-based culture is to establish a veteran network or affinity group with leadership endorsement. Have managers and company leaders address this group and ensure members feel important, understood, and valued. Don't forget to include those serving in the Guard or Reserves, which helps maintain an active connection to the military community. When possible, involve families in outside work events and social activities. Perform acts of service in the local community and celebrate these across the organization to encourage maximum participation. Finally, make the group visible throughout recruiting materials and on corporate websites so candidates know the organization values service. This recommendation goes beyond veteran affinity groups and gets others who served directly involved in the hiring and onboarding process.

## HOW EMPLOYERS CAN ASSIST **CONTINUED**

### **INCORPORATE VETERANS THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS**

Veterans bring credibility to the recruiting and onboarding process for multiple reasons and should be visible throughout. The ability to ask questions and gather perspectives from someone who served is powerful and brings credibility. The sooner the military audience sees individuals with similar experiences inside the organization, the better. We recommend incorporating veterans in hiring events, career fairs, on-site visits, pre/post interviews, and encouraging participation in mentoring programs. Service members are often given a sponsor when changing duty locations, and this dynamic can help reduce the stress and confusion of joining your organization. Once the job offer is extended, consider assigning a sponsor with a similar military background. This communicates support, structure, and promotes open and candid discussions.

### **PROVIDE TRAINING FOR MANAGERS THAT DON'T HAVE MILITARY EXPERIENCE**

When hiring recently transitioned service members, consider assigning a manager with military experience to improve the onboarding process. When not practical, we suggest orientation training for non-veteran managers. Training should include a general understanding of military branches, ranks, and culture. Involve veterans in this training and align a veteran-mentor with managers in a consulting-type role.



**BARRIERS \* LIMITATIONS \* VOIDS & CONCERNS**

# WHAT OTHERS SAY

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*“Any significant life change is difficult and getting out of the military represents several at the same time. You’re entering a new environment, learning a new language, moving to a new location, and starting a new career. Realize it won’t be easy.”*

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*“Be honest with yourself and others about what you want in life. Don’t settle for something you are not interested in doing.”*

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*“Start early. Make and follow a transition plan. Talk to people with recent transition and civilian experience. Practice telling stories about yourself: what, how, and the impact in plain (non-military) terms.”*

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*“The camaraderie that you had while wearing the uniform isn’t likely to be at the same level when you put on a suit, and you’ll miss that so figure out a way to cope.”*

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*“Learn to speak the language of the industry you want to work in. Know the required and preferred qualifications for the industry, and attain them. Start early!”*

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# HELPING HANDS



## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

- [USAA.com/my/usaa](https://www.usaa.com/my/usaa)
- [TakeChargeAmerica.org/financial-resources-for-veterans](https://www.TakeChargeAmerica.org/financial-resources-for-veterans)

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

- Stop Soldier Suicide
- Lifeline for Vets
- Veterans Crisis Line
- Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-844-609-0861

1-888-777-4443

1-800-273-8255 - Press #1

988



## COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTEERING

- [TeamRWB.org](https://www.TeamRWB.org)
- [MissionContinues.org](https://www.MissionContinues.org)
- [IAVA.org](https://www.IAVA.org)
- [BlueStarFam.org](https://www.BlueStarFam.org)
- [WoundedWarriorProject.org](https://www.WoundedWarriorProject.org)
- [TeamRubiconUSA.org](https://www.TeamRubiconUSA.org)



Transitions

## NETWORKING AND MENTORS

- [Veterans.linkedin.com](https://www.Veterans.linkedin.com)
- [ACP-usa.org](https://www.ACP-usa.org)
- [Veterati.com](https://www.Veterati.com)

# HIRING OUR HEROES

U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE  
FOUNDATION

## EMPLOYMENT AND CAREERS

- [USO.org/transition](https://www.USO.org/transition)
- [Skillbridge.osd.mil](https://www.Skillbridge.osd.mil)
- [HireHeroesUSA.org](https://www.HireHeroesUSA.org)
- [Military-Transition.org/resources](https://www.Military-Transition.org/resources)
- [RecruitMilitary.com/job-seekers](https://www.RecruitMilitary.com/job-seekers)
- [HiringOurHeroes.org/career-services](https://www.HiringOurHeroes.org/career-services)
- [FourBlock.org/programs/find-your-calling](https://www.FourBlock.org/programs/find-your-calling)
- [Gljobs.com](https://www.Gljobs.com)

# FOURBLOCK

VETERAN CAREER READINESS





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